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Podemos's Shift towards the Centre Ground?

By Paul Kennedy on 5 May 2015



Spain's anti-austerity party, Podemos, has faced its most important crisis to date just weeks before local and regional elections are held throughout the country on 24th May. Juan Carlos Monedero, one of the party's founding members and a key figure with respect to defining Podemos's ideological approach, [resigned from his post](#) last week as coordinator of the party's policy programmes. Shortly before stepping down from the leadership, he [expressed his dissatisfaction with Podemos's strategic direction](#), indicating that the party's more pragmatic approach was divorcing it from its roots in social protests such as the 15-M anti-austerity movement. According to Monedero, the leadership was 'more interested in a minute on TV' than in finding time to meet up with the party's grassroots, or 'circles'. Furthermore, he claimed that 'we sometimes look just like what we're trying to replace', a reference to the *casta*, the term used by Podemos to refer to what it views as the corrupt, self-serving political establishment. In a valedictory letter entitled, 'To my Friend, Pablo', Monedero nevertheless stressed that he was proud to call the party leader, Pablo Iglesias, a friend, he thanked him for his contribution and cautioned him not to be left dispirited by 'so many lies.' For his part, Iglesias wished Monedero well, characterising him as 'not being a party man.... He's more of a free spirit.'

Monedero's exit is nevertheless indicative of tensions within the party leadership at a critical time in Podemos's development. Its programme for the regional elections – drawn up under Monedero – was published on 5th May, several weeks later than originally planned, an indication that the document has not enjoyed an easy birth. Iglesias recently declared that Podemos's *raison d'être* was 'winning general elections' and the means adopted to obtain these ends appear to have been at the heart of internal disputes. Dissatisfaction at the party's leadership style led to the resignation in April of Iratxe Osinaga, Podemos's second-in-command in the Basque Country, and she also resigned her membership of the party, claiming that she was unable to support key aspects of the programme proposed by the regional leader, Roberto Uriarte. April also witnessed the resignation of the party's leader in San Sebastian, Hantot Sansinenea, 'for personal reasons'.

The key task facing Podemos is eloquently identified by Monedero above: challenging the *casta* whilst ensuring that the party does not become part of that very same *casta* by displaying the imperfections implicit in being just another political party. Ideological purity versus pragmatic practice therefore constitute the two souls of Podemos, hardly a novel dilemma for an anti-system party with designs on gaining office.

Scathing criticism of the corrupt nature of the *casta* is a further characteristic feature of the party. Podemos's failure to match up to its own exacting standards in the area has proved costly. Monedero himself caused the party considerable embarrassment in this connection when it emerged in January 2015 that he was paid 425,000 euros in 2013 via a private company he had set up that same year for work carried out in 2010 as a consultant to the governments of Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua concerning the introduction of a single currency in the region. Those critical of Podemos claimed that the money was proof that Podemos's reliance on Latin America went beyond party leaders' appreciation of political theorists such as Ernesto Laclau. Monedero duly submitted a related income tax payment of 204,000 euros, a sum which included a 15 per cent penalty for late payment. Another incident simultaneously came to light which concerned Íñigo Errejón, Iglesias's lieutenant and Podemos's campaign strategist. He obtained a research contract at the University of Malaga via which he received 1,825 euros a month for carrying out research into public housing in Andalusia. Little actual research was completed and the suspicion remained that the contract was awarded thanks to the influence of Alberto Montero, Chair of Economics and a member of Podemos: Errejón was the only applicant. In both the above cases, Podemos chose to react to the revelations by criticising the media as being just another branch of the *casta*, rather

than challenging the veracity of the allegations or acknowledging that the two party leaders had a case to answer. Monedero's recent resignation nevertheless indicates that Podemos was finding it increasingly difficult to criticise the misdemeanours of the other major political parties when it had patently failed to keep its own affairs above board.

The hitherto seemingly irresistible rise of Podemos has also been stemmed over recent months by the breakthrough of Ciudadanos (Citizens) from its Catalan home turf onto the Spanish national scene. Sharing Podemos's critique of the political establishment, Ciudadanos currently appears capable of challenging Podemos's monopoly as regards providing a voice for those voters left feeling disenfranchised by the current system and seeking something new. Podemos and Ciudadanos may therefore be competing for the same constituency over the coming months. The decline in the Socialist PSOE's vote also appears to have been curtailed, with the party's victory at the Andalusian regional election in March 2015 indicating the party's resilience, albeit in a Socialist stronghold. Recent opinion polls appear to confirm the demise of Spain's two-party system with [just three percentage points](#) separating Podemos, the PSOE, the PP and Ciudadanos.

Podemos has reached a defining moment in which continued progress appears to depend on a shift towards a centre ground previously occupied by two parties whose credibility has diminished considerably over recent years. Despite this change of emphasis having contributed towards Monedero's resignation, Pablo Iglesias, together with Íñigo Errejón, have been able to tighten their control over the leadership and minimise the influence of Podemos's grassroots on the party's direction, thereby steering the party away from its anti-system origins. Given that a majority of potential Podemos voters have consistently identified the party as being more to the left of the political spectrum than they view themselves, this change of tack has an obvious logic, although more radical supporters may be left disillusioned by this strategic shift. Podemos now has the task of matching its eloquent critique of the failings of the *casta* with an equally convincing – and practical – programme of government. For a party whose policies have hardly been notable for their depth of detail, the scale of the task is considerable and it remains to be seen whether Monedero's resignation constitutes a key stage in preparing the party to meet this challenge.

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